



Sierra Club Hawai'i Chapter

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CITY COUNCIL, CITY AND COUNTY OF HONOLULU COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AND SUSTAINABILITY

April 4 2012, 1:00 P.M.
(Testimony is 3 pages long)

TESTIMONY STRONGLY SUPPORTING THE INTENT OF BILL 10 (2012) CD1

Aloha Chair Chang and Committee Members -

The Sierra Club, Hawai'i Chapter, with 10,000 dues-paying members and supporters, **strongly supports** the intent of Bill 10 (2012) CD1 but respectfully asks this Committee to temporarily hold the measure for further consideration.

I. Background:

A. *Disproportionate Impact on the Environment.*

Throwaway bags have a disproportionate impact upon the environment. As they are loosed into the wild -- the modern-day tumbleweed -- they contribute to litter and pose a threat to avian and marine life in Hawai'i. As noted by NOAA,¹ plastic photo-degrades -- breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces due to exposure to solar UV radiation. However, when in water plastic does not get direct sunlight exposure, therefore breakdown happens much more slowly in the aquatic environment. So far as we know, plastics do not ever fully "go away," but rather break down into smaller and smaller pieces, sometimes referred to as microplastics.

Plastics also have the potential to adsorb contaminants from the marine environment and carry these contaminants through the food chain. Plastic debris attracts and accumulates hydrophobic organic toxins such as PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) up to 100,000-1,000,000 times ambient seawater concentrations. These toxins can then bioaccumulate up the food chain, where they directly impact human health.

¹ See <http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/info/plastic.html>

B. Solid Waste Crisis.

Honolulu is faced with a solid waste crisis. The proliferation of throwaway bags contributes to this problem. They tax our economy and environment when they are littered or placed in our overflowing landfills. For example, a recent study conducted in Seattle concluded -- even with a high 13% recycling rate (greater than the national average of 3-5%) -- approximately 1,650 tons of plastic bags were put into the landfill annually.² The net cost to Seattle and ratepayers of collecting, transferring and disposing of waste was calculated to be approximately \$121 per ton or approximately \$200,000 annually for plastic grocery bags.

Even if these bags are burned at H-POWER, they are essentially converted to greenhouse gasses, further hastening global climate change, and ultimately not addressing the root of our unsustainable problem.

C. Cost to Our Economy.

"Free" single use bags are an expense that is typically not directly visible by customers. Retailers spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually to provide single-use bags to customers. For example, individual supermarkets can spend up to \$1,500 to \$6,000 a month just to provide single-use bags to their customers at the check-out.³ Even major retailers such as Target and CVS are realizing this significant cost burden and are offering discount incentives to customers who bring their own bags.⁴

The cost of purchasing hundreds of millions of bags in Hawai'i annually is most certainly passed on to local consumers, but it is not a visible cost and, thus, normal market controls do not take place. As with anything "free," we tend to take advantage of the ready supply of throwaway bags without considering the indirect costs.

It should be noted that two highly successful business in Hawai'i -- Costco and Wholefoods -- do not offer its customers plastic bags. These businesses are flourishing. The switch by Wholefoods alone kept 100 million plastic bags out of the environment between April 22, 2008 and the end of 2008.

² See Alternatives to Disposable Shopping Bags and Food Service Items, available at http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/util/Services/Recycling/Reduce,_Reuse_&_Exchange/ProposedGreenFee/index.htm

³ Downing, J. "Free Grocery Bags Targeted for Extinction in California," *Sacramento Bee*, Aug. 25, 2008. Estimates from bag manufacturers and the Food Marketing Institute. Available at http://www.roplast.com/documents/Free_grocery_bags_targeted_for_extinction_in_California_-_Sacramento_Politics_-_California_Politics__Sacramento_Bee.pdf.

⁴ Horovitz, B. "Target, CVS Put Plastic Bags in the Bull's-Eye, Pay for Reusables," *USA Today*, Oct. 19, 2009.

II. Specific Concerns:

As an initial matter, there may be ambiguity as to whether the County may impose fees under its statutory authority without a clear nexus for the services offered/received. At least one state legislator indicated they will be asking for an opinion from the State Attorney General on this bill. We suggest it might be useful to explore this issue further.

To the extent a fee is imposed, it should be imposed on the consumer and not the retail store. The intent of a fee is to create a gentle incentive to avoid using throwaway bags. If a retailer could simply pay the fee without passing on the cost to the consumer, the policy intent would be lost.

Further, the fee should be imposed on paper bags as well as plastic. Both are not in our sustainable future. It would not be a “win” for the environment if we simply convert consumers from one disposable item to another. Strong efforts should be made to encourage the use of true sustainable solutions, like reusable bags.

The Sierra Club supports a ban on just plastic bags but would encourage the consideration of other measures -- like the bills currently being considered by the Hawai‘i State Legislature that would impose a fee on paper and plastic bags -- to reduce the dependence on all throwaway bags. As indicated earlier, the goal is to move people to reusable bags. Simply converting folks from one wasteful item to another is not a sustainable proposition.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.